

## **Maori women and dual ethnicity: Non-congruence, “passing” and “real Maori”**

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*In this study, I wanted to explore the often uncomfortable experience of having dual ethnicity. I did this through open-ended interviews with nine women, who, like me, were aged between 20 and 30 and who identified as being of both Maori and Pakeha (or other) descent.*

*While the women all identified as having dual ethnicity, as the interviews progressed it became clear that many of them had little pride in being of Pakeha descent and identified more strongly with their Maori heritage. In most instances the way they were identified by other people was incongruent with how the participants identified themselves. By virtue of having fair skin, many were able to “pass” as Pakeha. This provided them with certain advantages, notably being exempt from racist treatment. On the other hand, their appearance often resulted in them being labelled as not being a “real Maori.” Paradoxically, when they were identified as Maori, others, both Maori and non-Maori, sometimes expected them to be an expert in all things Maori. For most participants being a “real” Maori did not rely on looking Maori or on being able to speak Te Reo fluently. Instead, having whakapapa was considered the most essential element on which to base their Maori identity.*

The concept of identity is at the heart of complex social relationships between individuals and groups in society. In everyday situations one’s identity is called into question by society. The presentation or negotiation of identity has the potential to shake the very foundations of our lives (Jenkins, 1996). Identity is a concept of sameness and simultaneously establishing two possible relations of comparisons between people: on one hand, similarity and on the other, difference. Harris (1995) suggested that identity refers simply to “... an individual’s sense of uniqueness, of knowing who one is, and who one is not” (p.1), in turn contributing to a healthy personal identity (Abrams, 1990; Bradley, 1996). Of the various aspects of identity, ethnicity is one of the most salient, especially for people who are not members of dominant ethnic groups (for whom ethnicity may have a non-problematic, taken-for-granted nature).

### **Background to the research**

When my mother and her sisters were growing up they had minimal experiences of things Maori, as my grandparents were of the opinion that for their children to succeed they needed to be Pakeha. Maori language was usually only spoken at home when my grandparents wanted to prevent their children from understanding what was

being said. In effect, it was a secret code. Similarly there was an absence of things Maori from the school curriculum. It is as if, in my family, a wall of invisibility and silence has been built around being Maori.

Over recent years this has become an extremely painful subject. There is a sense for my mother and aunts that something is missing from their lives. This has had a ripple effect on me, as there was also an absence of things Maori from my own life. As a child the only things Maori I was aware of were Maori friends in the playground, the occasional Maori song and words in “Maori hour” and the Maori food we ate every now and then. At high school, things Maori had negative connotations. For example, “they”, the Maori children, were always the ones who were in trouble. We learnt about the British feudal and religious systems, and about the New Zealand Land Wars which were always referred to as the “Maori” land wars. The absence of things Maori from my own life have often created pain and embarrassment as I did not know who, or where I was from.

Discovering who I was, a woman of dual ethnic descent, has been an extremely traumatic journey. How could I explain to people that my dead great grandmother was in effect speaking to me, without people

thinking I had “lost the plot”. I was depressed and isolated, feeling as if I was the only person in the world experiencing these types of thoughts and emotions. The main drive for conducting this research was to see if there were other women who had similar experiences and were “like” me.

Claiming dual ethnicity is a very dynamic process, which in my instance has changed frequently. At times I feel comfortable with being both Maori and Pakeha, and then other times identify more strongly with being Maori, and other times cannot be bothered with the ethnic politics of either side.

### **Aims of the study**

I wanted to explore some of the pathways that have lead women to identify themselves as being of dual ethnicity. Here, I was thinking of pathways as events and experiences that may have occurred during the time the women were growing up. I also wanted to document the issues faced by women of dual ethnic descent and the strategies they used to develop, maintain and strengthen their dual ethnic identity.

I thought that this was appropriate research for me to carry out because of the similarity between my ethnic background and that of the participants. I tried to work alongside them so that they were able to position themselves in the role of “expert” and share experiences they have had in the development of their ethnic identity.

By conducting this research, I wanted to provide a document that could be read by other people in a similar situation. I wanted such readers to know they are not isolated in their identity struggles and that there is no one correct way to being a woman with dual ethnicity.

### **Method**

I recruited women who (a) identified themselves as being of Maori and another ethnic group(s) descent and (b) were between the ages of 20 and 30. This age group was used so that participants would be from the same era as I and may have had similar experiences growing up (such as the same primary school curriculum, wearing the same fashion, watching the same

television programmes and listening to the same music).

Finding participants was slightly problematic, as I was unable to tell by looking at a person whether they met the criteria. The selection process involved a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Robson, 1993).

I interviewed nine women, face to face, using a semi-structured interview.

### **Defining dual ethnicity**

There are many terms used to describe people who have membership of two or more ethnic groups: for example, *biracial*, *multiracial* and *interracial*. The term I used was *dual ethnicity*. The term refers to the fact that the participants are able to claim membership of two ethnic groups. Claims to a dual ethnic identity does not mean that participants necessarily have one parent from each ethnic group. Ethnic membership may also be claimed through grandparents or great grandparents (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996).

The participants of this study identified themselves as being of dual (and in some cases multiple) ethnic descent. For many of the participants the ethnic groups that constituted their dual ethnicity consisted of a dominant group and a non-dominant group. However, in some cases both groups would be considered as non-dominant groups in a New Zealand context. For example, combinations of ethnic groups were Maori and Pakeha (such as Scottish, English, French Canadian), Maori and Tongan, Maori and Spanish.

There were two ways in which participants identified themselves as having dual ethnicity: descent and geographic origin. Ethnic origin was usually identified through parents and grandparents. For example, Marama based her dual ethnicity on descent:

*... my father is a first generation person from England ... He's from Norwich in England and as far as I know, he has through his mother and father, Welsh and English ancestry. ... On my mother's side I'm Maori.*

*On the other hand, Jacki described dual ethnicity using countries of origin.*

*Maori [has] already been said. I would also have to say Tongan, in that my mother was born in Tonga and her parents were Tongan. ... I would also have to say European and by that I guess I mean British and other European countries.*

Pinderhughes (1995) suggested that denying one part of a person's ethnic heritage makes biracial individuals vulnerable to a sense of disloyalty to one parent. This may help explain why some participants identified themselves as having a dual ethnic heritage: they did not want to choose one ethnic group over another.

At the beginning of the interview many of the participants identified themselves as having dual ethnicity. However, as we explored the subject it became clear that many of the participants did not have a sense of pride in being of Pakeha descent. They identified more strongly with their Maori heritage. Lack of pride in being Pakeha may be attributed to feeling guilt for the part those ancestors played in the colonisation of Maori people, the effects of which are still visible.

Strong identification with being of Maori descent may be attributed to several factors. For example, some of the participants grew up in Maori contexts and experienced various aspects of Maori life. Many of the participants who identified strongly with being of Maori descent had few non-Maori relations living in New Zealand.

### **Identification by other people**

A major finding which emerged from participants' accounts was that in most instances the identity attributed by other people was incongruent with how participants identified themselves. For some participants this meant being identified as Pakeha by both Pakeha and Maori as they did not have 'Maori' physical attributes. This seemed to be due to their fair skin and fine facial features. Being identified as Pakeha was problematic as it meant participants had to continually identify themselves and justify their presence in Maori contexts.

Physical characteristics may not only be markers for identifying people: they can also be used as tools for excluding people from a group. One participant, Katarina, who has blonde hair, blue eyes and olive skin, reported that she is often identified as Pakeha by other Maori in work situations, and as a result she sometimes receives a less than pleasant reception from Maori people.

*I had one situation where I went into a room and I was introducing myself to some staff members. [The] team was half Maori half Pakeha, which is pretty unusual 'cause it's normally all Pakeha. In the proposal [at] the beginning I had put my whakapapa. I got ignored by two Maori men basically when I walked in the room. ... The proposal went round and they were reading it. I saw them really obviously reading it and looking at me like going "whoa!" They came up and apologised to me afterwards for basically ignoring me...*

Debbie, who has fair skin, described being left out of Maori groups in social situations because she was believed to be Pakeha. As soon as Debbie explains who her family is she is generally allowed to join in. Similarly Debbie mentioned that her extended whanau pick on her and her siblings because their skin is pale when compared to the rest of the whanau. They are not considered dark enough to be Maori.

It was suggested by Brown (1990) that biracial children often become hypersensitive to being defined by white people in ways incongruent with how they identify themselves. My findings suggest that the same can occur when such attempts to define them come from members of the non-white group to which they also belong.

### **Being perceived as Pakeha can be an advantage**

Although incongruent with the way they viewed themselves, participants sometimes thought there were advantages in being identified or "passing" as Pakeha (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Daniel, 1992; Jenkins, 1996; Miller, 1992; Phinney, 1989). Passing as Pakeha had enabled participants

to receive a higher standard of service from government departments and to be privy to more information. Participants surmised that these privileges would not have been available if they were identifiably Maori. For example, Marama suggested that being brought up as Pakeha had some advantages.

*[B]ecause I've been brought up as a Pakeha there's still that side of me that can become very Pakeha. I have the ability to be very Pakeha. ... To be very kind of "professional" and speak in a different way. ... The words I use, my grammar, my tone, everything ... When I'm in a government department or something like that, I come across as a Pakeha person because it suits me to do that. ... [When] trying to get a flat, ... I come across as a good Pakeha psychologist person. I wouldn't get my flat if I came across as a Maori person.*

However, as Phinney (1990) reported, "passing" is not available to individuals who are undoubtedly members of a particular non-dominant ethnic group.

### **Expectations**

Describing oneself as Maori means certain expectations are placed on one's behaviour.

Firstly, if participants identified themselves as being Maori, it was often assumed by others that they will automatically know things like marae kawa. It is also commonly assumed that they would know where they were from (e.g. which marae, hapu and iwi). In some instances this was not the case. These participants only knew which iwi they were from but knew no details beyond that.

Secondly, participants reported that if they identified themselves as Maori, Pakeha would expect them to represent a Maori view. This was marked by questions such as "You're Maori – what do you think?". In this way, participants felt that they were expected to represent all Maori.

Thirdly, if participants identified themselves as being Maori it was often expected, by Maori and non-Maori alike,

that they would be able to speak Te Reo. Jacki recalled

*...an incident up at the Maori block where someone was speaking Maori to me. I was like kao don't speak Maori, and she carried on talking. ... I guess I was thinking that's not [in] the spirit of Maoridom, what you're doing ...*

If participants identified themselves as being Maori there was an assumption that they would look Maori and have they physical characteristics which people associate with being Maori (for example, dark skin and a broad nose). What has emerged from the interviews is the notion that being Maori does not rely on looking Maori and being able to speak fluent Maori. For most participants, having whakapapa is a strong enough base on which to build their identity. This is sufficient to identify themselves as being Maori. Similarly, learning te reo was not thought pivotal to one's identity as Maori. Many of the participants have begun learning Maori and to incorporate Maori words and values into their everyday lives. Being told "You are not a 'real' Maori" is often damaging to a person's self esteem and pride, particularly when one has only just begun to openly identify as being Maori. Once a secure Maori identity has been developed other strategies may be used to counteract such comments.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have presented a brief summary of some of my thesis findings, particularly three key areas as they relate to dual ethnicity: non-congruence, passing, and being a 'real Maori' person. I have found that there is a glaring absence of research relevant to dual ethnicity in New Zealand. It is hoped that this paper will increase awareness of some of the stressors women of dual ethnicity face in their daily lives.

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